

The University in the Anthropocene: Proposing a Pedagogy of Study Practices That Make Thought Creative of the Future

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THE INTRUSION OF GAIA

The Anthropocene, a concept popularized by the Nobel prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen to denote our current epoch in which humanity itself can be conceived as a geological force, has been widely taken up in scientific debates.¹ After a short exposition of the concerns that have been formulated regarding the concept of the Anthropocene, I will side with Isabelle Stengers who understands what is in the course of happening as the intrusion of Gaia, a concept with which she allows for a slightly different awareness of the problems that surround us and the challenges they bring. The aim of this paper is to propose study practices as a way of dealing with the challenges that come with the event of the intrusion of Gaia. Study practices weld together processes of scientific inquiry and political deliberation while rendering the collective of students that has come together around a problematic situation capable of responding in thoughtful and inventive ways. First, however, I will shed light on the debates regarding the Anthropocene.

Scholars in the fields of the humanities and the social sciences have discussed whether “Anthropocene” is an appropriate term to understand the processes the concept aims to indicate. Jason Moore, for instance, has argued that the “Anthropocene” risks putting the human being, *Anthropos*, center stage in what can be called a geology of species. Instead, he proposes to understand what is happening not as due to a species, but due to a system, namely capitalism. Capitalocene, hence, is the concept he suggests to grasp our current geological epoch as having been impacted not so much by *Anthropos*, the human being in general, but rather by the military-industrial complex, the vast expansion of

resource extraction and waste, factory farming, global trade, and other manifestations of capitalism.²

Concerned about the ways in which bad framings of problems can lead to bad responses, Donna Haraway has suggested to term our era the Chthulucene, foregrounding stories of entanglement, worldly practices, multispecies companionship, and sympoiesis (“making-with”) as opposed to the big narratives of Anthropos, Progress, Modernization, and History. In contrast to the image of the human being as maker and destroyer of the planet, noticing the ways in which human beings have always already been enmeshed in practices of world-making shared with many other species in more or less technologized environments might lead to more situated and contextualized responses to the challenges we face today, she argues.³

Another route in grasping our current epoch has been pursued by Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers who both—in a harmonious divergence—deploy the name Gaia in their estimation of our predicament. Earth, in the guise of Gaia, instead of Anthropos, is staged as the main protagonist of their narratives. Whereas Latour underscores the importance of a progressive composition of a common world in order to “face Gaia,” to come to terms with the consequences environmental destruction entails, Stengers conceives of Gaia as a ticklish assemblage that we have provoked and that is utterly disinterested in our response.⁴ She characterizes what we witness today as *the intrusion of Gaia*, an event which welds together social and ecological issues—think for instance, of the people who have lost their houses due to environmental catastrophes such as hurricanes.⁵

Stengers’ Gaia, the bastard-child of 20th century science and ancient paganism, Greek mythology, and the hypothesis formulated by Lovelock and Margulis, is the living assemblage of oceans, atmospheres, plants, climates, micro-organisms, and animals. She is the one that holds them together in her own particular way and who responds in an unexpected manner to the troubles caused to the processes that make up her fabric. Long before the Greeks conferred on their Gods a sense of justice and an interest in our destinies, Gaia already was the one who was feared by the peasants since they knew all too

well that they depended on something greater than themselves that nevertheless tolerated them. Gaia was not to be abused or offended. Instead, she was a cause for care and attention.⁶

Today, Stengers argues, ticklish and irritable Gaia has been provoked. Utterly indifferent to the question of who is responsible, Gaia is not interested in the ways in which we react to her intrusion. Stengers argues that Gaia asks nothing of us, as it is not she who is threatened today—microbes will survive the Sixth Big Extinction and hence, life on Earth is not under threat. Nevertheless, the intrusion of Gaia comes with a challenge. This challenge has not so much to do with the question of how to overcome an ecological ‘crisis,’ or how to ‘solve’ a problem (Gaia is here to stay!), as it requires us to rethink our relations towards one another and the Earth. More precisely, *the intrusion of Gaia confronts us with the challenge of living together on a damaged planet.*

This article starts from the assumption that the intrusion of Gaia does not so much require a scientific solution or a political answer. It is indeed not a matter of either knowledge acquisition and dissemination, or action and intervention, but rather requires a specific welding of knowledge and action, the scientific and the political, in order to slow down around a question. I will argue that what I propose to call study practices can effectuate such a slowing down.

A PROPOSITION

In recent years, different authors have taken up the challenge to rethink the university in the light of the questions and problems of our time. They have proposed to conceive of the university as intimately entwined in the fabric of the world, and situated by and engaged in the issues related to the intrusion of Gaia. Barnett, for instance, has proposed the idea of an ecological university that seeks to reach out into the world and to restore human-induced impairments.⁷ Masschelein and Simons advocate a world university that would gather a thinking public around matters of concern.⁸ Retooling concepts such as dwelling, the regional, and emplacement, Roussel reimagines university learning environments in response to social and ecological change.⁹ Peters inquires

what responsibility might mean for an eco-university in the green age.¹⁰ The worldhood university, suggested by Nørgård and Bengtsen, integrates amongst others the private, social, and professional sphere in an institution that is both world-made and world-making.¹¹ Wright, lastly, understands the university as deeply implicated in an increasingly capitalist environment and pleads for a university ecology in a livable landscape.¹²

My choice to focus on study practices instead of the university is prompted by two reasons. First, taking practices as a point of entry allows for circumventing the issues related to an all too general understanding of the university where it risks becoming a University, another big player in the History of Anthropos. It is this understanding of the university as a vector of Progress, Modernization, or Humanity that I would like to omit by focusing on the more small-scale, local, and partial connections that study practices bring into being. The second reason is my concern not to exclude study practices that might emerge outside of the contexts of academia. The intrusion of Gaia is an event that concerns us all, and hence it is likely that also in non-academic contexts people gather in order to study the environment they find themselves in, allowing them to respond in careful and attentive ways to what is in the course of happening. As such, the conception of study I wish to put forward does not so much indicate the individual study that is done, for instance, before an examination, but rather the collective gatherings around problematic situations that require not only more knowledge, but also, and most importantly, raise the question of how to live together.

What study practices entail has already been hinted at a few times. At this point, it might be relevant to come up with a more elaborate definition to give the reader a sense of what it means. I will do this in the form of a proposition. Using propositions is characteristic for a mode of theorizing that in recent years has been calling itself *speculative pragmatism* and that refers back to the speculative philosophy of Whitehead and more precisely the pragmatic reading of it as undertaken by, for instance, Stengers, Savransky, or Debaise.¹³ From a speculative-pragmatic approach, a proposition should not be understood as a declaration about the state of things as they are, but rather as something

that is proposed and can make us think in a certain way. As such, a proposition should not be evaluated on a cognitive level (“indeed we know that the cat is on the mat”), but rather on an affective level. It is not so much a matter of describing the actual or the probable, but rather of *activating the possible*. The proposition that I want to put forward here concerning the nature of study practices is the following:

Proposition I: Study practices weld the possible to a problematic situation by convoking matters of study via the arts of composition, problematization, and attention.

In the next section, the different parts of this proposition will be elucidated.

A PEDAGOGY OF STUDY

This section is divided in three subsections that each correspond with one part of the proposition. The first subsection clarifies the aim of study practices, namely the welding of the possible to a problematic situation. The second subsection elucidates how this takes place, namely by means of matters of study. In the last subsection, ultimately, it will be argued that engaging in study practices requires a threefold art, namely of composition, problematization, and attention. This section draws inspiration from Stengers’ reading of the work of Whitehead as well as her writings on the rituals of the Californian, neopaganist witch Starhawk, and aims to bring it to bear on the conceptualization of study practices.

Welding the Possible to a Problematic Situation

In general, it might be argued that the question that drives all study practices is how to transform the relationships we entertain with the world we inhabit in a thoughtful and inventive way. As such, study practices do not intend to find something new in the world; they are in the first instance not

interested in the production of new knowledge contents. Rather, study practices are concerned with addressing problematic situations (e.g., sudden migrations, floods, housing shortages, poverty). This means more precisely that they do not take for granted the ways in which we live our lives and turn our very living conditions into a cause for thinking. It is at this point that the possible comes in as a vital ingredient that has to be activated in the course of study practices and that will allow different practitioners to transform the ways in which they relate to the problematic situation. It can therefore be argued that the aim of study practices is to adventurously engage with the issues that make common sense ruminate in a way that transforms the terms in which the issue is understood, to make possible what Stengers calls “*the transformation of a problematic situation into a cause for collective thinking*.”¹⁴

What could it mean that study practices *adventurously* engage with something? Adventure is an important notion in the philosophy of Whitehead, and it is way of denoting what it means to think that is, in my estimation, very relevant to understand how study practices deal with problematic situations. Whitehead, who is committed to the idea that thought should not exclude anything and who endorses a conception of thinking as a speculative gesture that welds the possible to the problems that make common sense ruminate, understands the adventure as just such a speculative operation. The point of departure for every adventure in the Whiteheadian sense is the landscape of conflicting opinions concerning a problematic situation—what Stengers, commenting on Whitehead, calls the ruminations of common sense.¹⁵ To initiate an adventure means, however, not to denounce these opinions in order to unveil the truth—as if there would be something more true than the hopes, fears, dreams, and doubts that are related to a situation that is perceived as problematic—but to activate this landscape of diverging opinions in a way that makes something present so that this landscape of often contradictory claims can be transformed into a fabulous scenery of contrasting shades.¹⁶

The Convocation of Matters of Study

The transformative process that includes both the problematic situation as well as the people affected by it is made possible, I suggest, by the convocation of matters of study. The concept of matters of study denotes the artifices that are collectively being produced in the course of study practices (e.g., photographs, maps, fieldnotes, sketches). In the words of Stengers, it could be argued that a study practice “compels everyone to produce, to ‘artifactualize’ themselves, in a mode that gives the issue around which they are all gathered the power to activate thinking, a thinking that belongs to no one, in which no one is right.”¹⁷ A study practice thus differs from a political practice such as a debate. In the course of a debate, indeed different political positions are played out against each other. During study practices, on the contrary, these positions are themselves taken up in the adventurous process and are transformed in the presence of a matter of study.

The making present of matters of study has been called a convocation, which suggests that it is a kind of magic—not, however, the magic associated with the occult or dark arts, but rather the magic of neopaganist, ecofeminist, activist, Californian witches who have taken the risk of calling themselves witches and their practice magic. Magic is a process of convocation. The ritual makes something present. The efficacy of the ritual lies, however, not in the fact that an answer is given to a question, or a problem is resolved, due to the manifestation and intervention of a Goddess who judges. Its efficacy is rather “that of a presence that transforms each protagonist’s relations with his or her own knowledge, hopes, fears and memories, and allows the whole to generate what each other would have been unable to produce separately.”¹⁸

This process of becoming-able-to is hence a collective process, moreover a process that takes place in the presence of someone who is not the spokesperson or representative that can confirm or refute—a judge. The Goddess is present as a cause, but a cause that only exists in the effects that She produces when present, since She transforms the stakes that have been put up. Magic catalyzes “a regime of thought and feeling that bestows the power on that around which there is a gathering to become a cause for thinking.”¹⁹ Likewise, matters of study are convoked in the middle of a gathering of people affected

by the problematic situation in order to transform the ways in which they relate to this situation and activate a sense of being capable of, and of the possible.

Composition, problematization, attention

Convoicing matters of study involves a threefold art as has been claimed in the proposition. Explaining these three arts will further shed light on what study practices entail. The first art, of *composition*, has to do with the way in which people are brought together around something, and what kind of role they can assume in this gathering. Stengers describes the slow and often repetitive palaver as a thought-provoking practice to think about what it means to speak in an assembly. Hence, the efficacy of the composition is not due to the goodwill or tolerance of some of the participants with regards to their more persuasive associates. Rather, the slow and repetitive composition is generative. It produces a mutual sensibility concerning the reasons of all who will be affected by the decision until the decision will be made—and the impersonal is important here. The decision is not made by someone, not even by the collective, but it will have produced itself: “the decision to be made is made without anyone being able to appropriate it, without anybody else being able to guarantee that it is the best possible decision. The decision will have received ‘its’ reasons.”²⁰ The art of composition fosters a mutual sensibility and readiness to be affected by a question. It brings people together in a way that undoes both personal intentions and general solutions, in order to make them susceptible for a sympoietic process of interdependent co-becoming. It is a composition without composer, and definitely without transcendent position from which it is possible to evaluate what has been composed.

Second, the art of *problematization* has to do with how something is made present within the composition, namely as a matter of study. It involves the question how something—a situation, a cause—can make us think, how it can be transformed into a problem in order to suspend the “and thus” of rational debate and slow down reasoning, to make study possible. “The problematization does not go back to the most general but confers on the situation, always

this or that situation, the power to question what seemed to be self-evident.”²¹ Stengers argues that Leibniz’ injunction “Dic cur hic”—“Say why here”—is of relevance in relation to the art of problematization. What is at stake in this question is not the response that will be given, but rather the affective and existential transformation it induces, which she describes as an enlargement of the imagination to take into account all the consequences a possible response might play into. “The question *Dic cur hic* aims to have the efficacy to problematize the general reasons by making the ‘here’ [hic] come to matter—suspend your action, let yourself be affected by the ‘this,’ that is to say by *this* world.”²² Thus, Leibniz’ dictum problematizes general reasons that could be invoked in a discussion (e.g., “growth is the only solution”), in order to make the situation and our relations towards it truly problematic. The only reasons that can be taken up are those that come forth from and engage with the situation, henceforth a problematic situation. The art of problematization requires warding off all transcendent reasons that could be given, and engaging with all the divergent dimensions the problem plays into, to effectuate a transformation that takes up these reasons in an always local, situated, precarious, and partial response.

The art of *attention* is the third and final art that makes up a study practice. Moreover, it is arguable that the presence of this art transforms a study practice into a truly educational invention. A combination of only the arts of composition and problematization would engender an assembly coming into being around what Latour would call matters of concern.²³ The fact, however, that also the art of attention is practiced, ensures that what appears due to the working of the apparatus of activation is not only a matter of concern—something which we can have a discussion about that cannot be reduced to arguments of the kind as “sciences proves that ... and thus,” or “as evidence shows ... and thus”—but that it is empowered to become a matter of study, in the sense that we are not only summoned to give our reasons, but are also required to slow down reasoning, to study. Stengers defines the art of attention as follows:

The art of attention is an art of the middle voice, a tentacular art because it is about letting oneself be touched, and to give what touches us the power to make us feel and think, but

always “here”, never “off the ground.”²⁴

It is important to note that Stengers emphasizes that the art of attention is a relational one, tentacular in her words. It is impossible to be attentive in general. Attention is rather something that is elicited because something requires our attention, because something obligates us to think, hesitate, study, but this also implies that something has been given the power to make us think.

MAKING THOUGHT CREATIVE OF THE FUTURE

This general account of study practices can be summarized starting from the questions that often form the point of departure for study, namely: How does this situation concern us? What does this situation ask from us? How can we respond to what the situation demands? They are posed in such a way, moreover, that the response given can never be general nor generalizable, and there is no criterion with which the legitimacy of the response can be evaluated. Besides, it requires of those who come together that what will emerge from their assembly will not belong to any one of them in particular. It induces “a transformation that will remain relative to the event of ‘the acceptance of being touched by’,”²⁵ of paying attention.

Due to processes of thinking with artifices such as stories, maps, and pictures, an assemblage with social, technical, and material features comes into being that activates a problematic situation, which means that it acquires the power to gather a thinking public. The social feature of study practices denotes the fact that studying cannot be done in isolation. It is always a process of taking turns in a conversation. This conversation, moreover, comes forth out of a concern or a care for the matter at stake, but at the same time the conversation transforms the attitudes of concern and care because the matter at stake is studied. There is where the technical and material features come into play. Study is a technical dealing with the world in a way that transforms the world in study materials so that it becomes a matter of study. In doing so, study practices initiate learning processes that transform not only the world but also those who have become affected by this world, who have exposed themselves to it, who have studied it.

To conclude, and taking the relay from Stengers who took the relay from Marx and his *Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach*, it could be argued that the wager of engaging in study practices is to change the world, not just to understand it—at least, however, if the world, if *this* world, is given the power to change *us*, to force *our* thinking, and become affected by *it*.²⁶ As such, study practices are practices of empowerment in which a problematic situation is given the power to make the people who have gathered around it think. In that way, the arts of composition, problematization, and attention are indispensable in transforming the world into a matter of study and a cause for thinking. At its turn, moreover, this practice of empowerment of a problematic situation becomes empowering for the people who have gathered around it, who become capable of learning anew, of establishing new ways of relating to what has been given the power to make them think and invent ways of living together on a damaged planet—in short, “to make thought creative of the future.”²⁷

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2 Jason Moore, *Capitalism and the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

3 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

4 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

5 Isabelle Stengers, *Au Temps des Catastrophes: Résister à la Barbarie Qui Vient* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014).

6 Stengers, *Au Temps des Catastrophes*; Isabelle Stengers, “Autonomy and the Intrusion of Gaia,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 2 (2017): 381–400.

7 Ronald Barnett, *The Ecological University: A Feasible Utopia* (London: Routledge, 2018).

8 Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, “From Active Citizenship to World Citizenship: A Proposal for a World University,” *European Educational Research Journal* 8, no. 2 (2009): 236–248; Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, “The Idea of a World University,” *Interchange* 40, no. 1 (2009): 1–23.

9 David Roussel, “Dwelling in the Anthropocene: Reimagining University Learning Environments in Response to Social and Ecological Change,” *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 32, no. 2 (2016): 137–153.

10 Michael Peters, “The Eco-University in the Green Age,” *Review of Contemporary*

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11 Rikke Toft Nørgård and Søren Smedegaard Bengtsen, “The Worldhood University: Design Signatures and Guild Thinking,” in *The Thinking University: A Philosophical Examination of Thought and Higher Education*, eds. R. Barnett and S. Bengtsen (Rotterdam: Springer, 2018).

12 Susan Wright, “Can the University Be a Livable Institution in the Anthropocene?,” in *The University as a Critical Institution?*, eds. R. Deem and H. Egging (Rotterdam: Sense, 2017).

13 Didier Debaise and Isabelle Stengers, “L’insistance des Possible: Pour un Pragmatisme Spéculatif,” *Multitudes* 65, no. 4 (2016): 82–89; Martin Savransky, “The Wager of an Unfinished Present: Notes on Speculative Pragmatism,” in *Speculative Research: The Lure of Possible Futures*, eds. A. Wilkie, M. Savransky, and M. Rosengarten (London: Routledge, 2017).

14 Stengers, *Au Temps des Catastrophes*, 123 (emphasis in original).

15 Isabelle Stengers, *Civiliser la Modernité? Whitehead et les Ruminations du Sens Commun* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2017).

16 Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, trans. M. Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

17 Isabelle Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, trans. L. Carey-Libbrecht (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 1001.

18 Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” 1002.

19 Ibid.

20 Stengers, *Civiliser la Modernité*, 47 (my translation).

21 Ibid., 51 (my translation).

22 Ibid.

23 Latour, *What is the Style of Matters of Concern?* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2008).

24 Stengers, *Civiliser la Modernité*, 197 (my translation).

25 Ibid., 68 (my translation).

26 Isabelle Stengers, “Experimenting with Refrains: Subjectivity and the Challenge of Escaping Modern Dualism,” *Subjectivity* 22 (2008): 38–59.

27 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 82 (originally published in 1929).